

Civil War monument honors Vermont Brigade

By Erin Kelly
Free Press Washington Writer

September 17, 2006

WASHINGTON -- More than 140 years ago, a brigade of 2,800 Vermonters fought off the Confederate Army in the dense forest of northern Virginia in a bloody struggle to prevent the rebels from capturing key ground and dividing the Union Army.

When the Battle of the Wilderness was over, nearly half of the Vermont Brigade were dead, wounded or missing.

The first day of that two-day battle in May of 1864 was the single worst day of casualties for the Green Mountain Boys in the entire Civil War. But they won their struggle to beat back the Army of Northern Virginia, allowing Gen. Ulysses Grant to head south in his quest to destroy the Confederate Army.

The memory of those soldiers was honored Saturday with a granite monument made in the quarries of Barre, Vt. The monument was unveiled on the edge of the woods in the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, about an hour and half outside of Washington, D.C.

"Standing here, with the woods largely unchanged, it is easy to imagine the thick underbrush and dense trees, the closeness of the two armies, the heat and heavy smoke conditions that faced the Vermont Brigade," Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., said in prepared remarks at the unveiling. "This magnificent monument will be a lasting tribute to the Vermont Brigade and its personal sacrifices for many generations to come."

The 17-ton granite monument, made by Rock of Ages in Barre, is 8 feet long and 2 feet high. Sculptor Walt Celley chiseled the shape of Vermont's landmark Camel's Hump on top of the monument, which also is engraved with the words "The Vermont Brigade" and a brief description of the battle.

Jeffords, a history buff, pushed for five years to win approval for the monument and secure \$200,000 for the National Park Service to use to create trails, signs, parking and access to the monument. The Vermont Legislature provided \$40,000 for the monument's construction.

More than 5,200 Vermonters died fighting for the Union in the Civil War.

For Vermont, May 5, 1864, was the bloodiest day in the state's history, said John Hennessy, chief historian of the national military park where the monument has been erected. Soldiers had to fight for hours in dense woods where they could barely see where they were shooting, he said.

"The losses that the Vermont Brigade suffered were just staggering," Hennessy said. "That one brigade suffered nearly 10 percent of the federal army's total casualties. It reverberated in the living room parlors across Vermont in a huge, huge way. If you were to canvass the ghosts of the Army of the Potomac as to the horrors they endured, the Battle of the Wilderness would be very high on everybody's list."

Contact Erin Kelly at ekelly@gns.gannett.com.